

## 1. Potomac Conference Yields: Baptisms by Women Halted

by Roy Branson with Diane Gainer

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The General Conference officers have rejected the proposal by the Potomac Conference that baptisms by women pastors be at least discussed—if not approved—by the Annual Council, and that a committee be established to discuss at greater length the distinct issue of granting ministerial licenses to women. September 18 the officers decided not to take such a step-by-step approach to the role of women in ministry, and insisted that these topics be addressed only within the larger question of whether the world church approves of ordaining women. The officers voted to recommend that the Annual Council establish a special committee, with representatives from each world division and the Biblical Research Institute, to re-study the policy and theological ramifications of ordaining women. This special committee is to report to Spring Council, which will presumably make recommendations to the 1985 General Conference Session. The question of whether women pastors in the Potomac Conference can baptize will have been escalated to the issue of whether the world church agrees to ordain women throughout the denomination.

A month earlier, in a meeting with the

same General Conference officers, the Potomac Conference Executive Committee agreed to “table” its earlier action authorizing the licensing of the women pastors in their conference. Members of the Potomac Conference Committee understood that the General Conference officers would not find it difficult to at least recommend approval of baptizing by women pastors. Now, the committee must decide which is more important: cooperating with the world church, or affirming the ministry of its women pastors by holding to its May 16 action to grant them ministerial licenses. Since the beginning of 1984, the three women, trained at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary who have several years of pastoral experience each, have baptized 12 people in six different baptismal services.

On Aug. 16, Neal Wilson and the officers of the General Conference (vice presidents, treasurers, secretaries) summoned the executive committee of the Potomac Conference to come to the General Conference building for a five-hour meeting. The discussion revolved around the action of the Potomac Conference in May authorizing ministerial licenses for three trained and experienced female pastors: Jan Daffern, Marsha Frost, and Frances Wiegand. (The May 16 action of the conference stated that implementation of the authorization was to take place

after the 1984 Annual Council; see *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 2.) Neal Wilson, in an hour-long presentation, repeated in public what for weeks he and other officers had been saying forcefully in private. The issue was no longer simply one of women in pastoral ministry, but one of church authority. The local conference must rescind its interpretation of church policy, acknowledging that the status of women pastors must be determined by the General Conference and the North American Division.

Three-quarters of the way through the afternoon, the Potomac Conference president, Ronald Wisbey, volunteered on behalf of the committee to table the May 16 action to license women pastors in the Potomac Conference. The conference also "respectfully recommended" that church leaders

- consider authorizing participation in the ceremony of baptism by ordained church elders (even in the presence of an ordained minister) when that ordained elder has received prescribed theological training from church institutions and is serving in a pastoral role in the church where the baptism takes place;
- establish a study group, including representatives from conferences with women in ministry, to explore the feasibility of granting ministerial licenses to women pastors, either on a world-wide or local basis. The conference added that if, following the recommendations of a study group, pilot programs were established, "the Potomac Conference would appreciate being involved;"
- accept the fact that there are those, including the Potomac Conference Committee, who believe the time should come when women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be accepted as fully equal to men without being viewed as a threat to church authority.

In response, Wilson promised that if the conference approved tabling its May 16 action to license its women pastors, he

would take up with the General Conference officers the possibility of changing the *Church Manual* in the manner suggested by the Potomac Conference. Earlier in the discussions, the president had acknowledged that over several years the General Conference had adopted official actions encouraging women to enter pastoral ministry, including providing financial assistance for women to study at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Wilson also noted that many letters had been received from church members on this subject—almost all supporting women in ministry. It was time, he said, that the church either admit it had made mistakes in encouraging women to enter the pastorate or make positive moves to make women equal in the Adventist ministry.

In effect, the Potomac Conference Committee on Aug. 16 dropped its insistence that denominational working policy does not prohibit local conferences from granting licenses to women pastors. (A subject of differing interpretations is an Annual Council action regarding women in ministry not written into the actual *Working Policy*. In its Oct. 17, 1977, form the action reads: 1. "Adoption of 'Associates in Pastoral Care' to identify persons who are employed on pastoral staffs but who are not in line for ordination. 2. To agree that persons employed in this type of work should initially receive a missionary license and eventually missionary credentials.") While committee members like Robert Coy, deputy general counsel of the Veteran's Administration, do not believe denominational policy specifically prohibits conferences granting ministerial licenses to women, Ronald Wisbey and the Potomac Conference Executive Committee acquiesced to the postponement of granting licenses to women until the highest levels of the church agree—sometime. At the meeting, Neal Wilson predicted that it would

take at least two years for such a consensus to form.

However, many conference committee members are adamant that they have not removed themselves permanently from the decision about what they now describe as a distinct issue: whether the women pastors in their conference will be able to baptize—their Aug. 16 action says, “by the end of the current calendar year.” Coy understands the language of “tabling” an action already adopted as a “step sideways, not backwards.” The committee, he says, is cooperating “in good faith” with the General Conference to see that women pastors can baptize “until that faith is destroyed.” Nancy Marter, a member of not only the Potomac Conference Committee but also the General Conference Committee on the Role and Function of Denominational Organizations, agrees that the conference committee took its latest action in good faith; she also says that ultimately, members of “the conference committee must follow our consciences.” Londis insists that “the

*sine qua non* for many—if not all—members of the conference committee is their deep conviction that this is a moral issue: God is calling the Adventist church, as he did the early Christian church, to bring all members into full equality in Christ. This cannot occur without the SDA ministry acting as a model. That is why for the committee the moral and spiritual demands of this issue take precedence over details of policy.”

Meanwhile, the conference committee members stress the positive statements made to them by Neal Wilson and church leaders. Ron Halvorsen, who recently moved from the Mid-America Union, where he was director of the Ministerial Department, to become senior pastor of the Takoma Park Church, says that “Elder Wilson asked the conference committee to trust denominational leadership. I would be very surprised if church leadership didn’t approve women pastors in North America baptizing soon—certainly before the General Conference Session. If that doesn’t happen I will be surprised and shocked.”